

Waste collectors in the South want to assert their role in the fight against greenhouse effect.

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Chiffonniers and recyclers want to benefit from international support mechanisms.

In many large cities in developing countries, much of the waste treatment is provided by independent waste pickers living in separate communities and deriving their livelihoods from sorting and recycling waste. They are some twenty million worldwide and, in the last twenty years or so, have been organized into associations.

Recently, they have formed the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and were formally present at the climate conference held in Cancun, in December 2010, in order to assert the role of waste pickers in the reductions of greenhouse gas emissions.

As illustrated in a recent report from the United Nations Program for the Environment, "[Waste and Climate Change](#)", the waste sector accounts for between 3% and 5% of global emissions of greenhouse gases, either as carbon dioxide produced by their combustion or the methane released from the decomposition of organic waste. To limit these emissions, incineration or

methane recovery projects are eligible for Clean Development Mechanism (CDM), which generates “mission credits” redeemable on the carbon market.

But waste pickers criticize the way these projects are selected and implemented. “They only benefit the big companies, protests Silvio Ruiz, who works in Bogota, Colombia. These CDMs seek only to put in place landfills and incinerators, which are not good solutions.”

The sorting and recycling practices of collectors would be more effective. According to a study entitled “Cooling agents”, conducted by Chintan, an NGO in India, current techniques save nearly four times more carbon dioxide emissions than an incinerator which benefited from CDM credits. “Recycling must be encouraged and we are doing just that,” said Simon Mbata, from Sasolburg, near Johannesburg, South Africa. To improve on it, the most efficient approach is sorting at source, after which we can take care of proper recycling.”

Collectors also state that the recovery of methane can be advantageously carried out through composting using small generators and biogas digesters. Such is the case in Bombay and Pune, in India, where these machines have been put in place through a partnership between the municipality and local associations of collectors : “We rigorously separate organic and other wastes,” says Vatsala Gaikwad, a female waste picker from Pune. “Organic materials are placed in the biogas machine where the gas provides electricity and cooking fuel to a quarter of our homes.”

“We are asking that our work be recognized as a means of limiting emissions”

Sorting, recovery, composting, biogas : waste pickers are positioning themselves as more efficient service providers than private companies with which municipalities are often signing more and more contracts. And, of course, they create jobs and, because of their recycling efforts, reduce the amount of raw materials to be produced. “We demand respect, said Mr. Mbata, and we are asking that our work be recognized as a means of limiting emissions.”

“The climate change funds must recognize the work of grassroots organizations, be they waste pickers, peasants or indigenous people,” adds Ruiz. The claim is meant for the forums that will follow Cancun : “Waste pickers are entitled to their share of the global green fund that is being put in place,” says Garima Gupta, a Chintan Association representative.

Source : Translation of *Les collecteurs d’ordures des pays du Sud veulent voir reconnu leur rôle contre le changement climatique* by **Wiego**. Article initially published by *Le Monde* of 6 January 2011.

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